



## The potency and impotence of official language policy

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# The potency and impotence of official language policy

Tore Kristiansen

## 0. Aim and approach

The purpose of this study is to shed light on whether and to what extent a community's 'official language ideology' – its explicitly professed language policy – has an impact on the speech community as such. Does the official language policy influence community members' values and valuations in the domain of language? Does the official language policy influence the ways that language is used in the community? If so, does its influence on use seem to happen in virtue of a great influence on values, or in spite of little influence on values? I shall attempt to answer these questions by making empirically based comparisons of ideology and use in two different settings. Our first setting will be the Danish speech community and its treatment of ideology and use in the 'dialect vs. standard' dimension; we may call this a study of 'internal purism'. Our second setting will allow us to compare 'external purism' towards English across several Nordic speech communities. Thus, in both settings we will depart from a characterisation of 'official' language ideology, which in turn will be compared, firstly, to 'lay' language ideology – as this is offered both *consciously* and *subconsciously* (since this distinction has turned out to be of decisive importance) – and, secondly, to the facts of language use.

## 1. Internal purism in Denmark

### 1.1. The official ideology

In order to characterize the official ideology of a country like Denmark in terms of how the 'dialect vs. standard' issue is treated, three public institutions in particular seem important to study – namely the school, the media, and the orthography. I shall limit myself to a few words about the school (for fuller accounts, see Kristiansen 1990, 2003). From the introduction of compulsory schooling in 1814 until the 1960's, discourse on variation as a norm issue simply did not exist. *Rigsdansk* ('standard Danish') was the 'natural' and 'self-evident' language of the school. The 'norm and variation' issue was dealt with only in terms of 'natural', 'distinct', 'clear', 'pure', 'nice' speech (the school's language) vs. 'distorted', 'indistinct', 'vulgar' speech (the youth's language). During the 1960's, the school's notion of *dannelse* ('educatedness') changed from this traditional 'bourgeois' version and its aesthetic and moral demands on language form, into a 'social democratic' version which addressed the norm issue in terms of 'normal', 'common', 'appropriate' language vs. 'special', 'group', 'inappropriate' language – i.e. as a demand for equality and situational adjustment. *Rigsdansk* (under the denomination of 'common language') was made legitimate ('communicatively appropriate and necessary') and innocent ('socially

neutral'). The youngest and most vital way of speaking the standard, known as *københavnsk* ('Copenhagen speech') was stigmatized, in terms borrowed from both discourses, as 'indistinct' and 'inappropriate group language'. The dying local *dialects* were highly estimated, in virtue of demands for 'tolerance, respect, love'. Thus, in today's official evaluative hierarchy of Danish varieties, we may say that *rigsdansk* and the *dialects* interchange in positions one and two depending on the perspective (communicative effectiveness or social identity) – while *københavnsk* is generally downgraded.

## 1.2. Consciously offered attitudes

'Label ranking' is a simple way of collecting huge amounts of readily quantifiable data which can be compared with the official evaluative hierarchy. Subjects are given a list of some 7–10 names of dialects covering all of Denmark, and are asked to compose a 'dialect chart'. The speech variation assumed to be relevant to social identification processes among adolescents in their local community is always included – in terms of *københavnsk*, *rigsdansk*, and the *local dialect* name (e.g. *fynsk*). Focusing on this variation in the analyses, we can summarize that adolescents in local communities all over Denmark rank the *local dialect* in first position, *rigsdansk* in second position, and *københavnsk* in third position. This pattern accords with the official hierarchy as this appears in its social-identity-stressing version.

## 1.3. Subconsciously offered attitudes

Label rankings are offered consciously (subjects are aware that they rank language varieties). Based on international sociolinguistic experience in general and Danish experience in particular, we may suspect that such 'overt' attitudes do not tell the whole story. Therefore, we have adopted an approach to 'lay' language ideology which stresses the importance of eliciting evaluative reactions to language variation in situations where subjects remain unaware that what they give away will be analysed and interpreted as their language attitudes. Such subconsciously offered attitudes may be obtained in 'speaker evaluation experiments', in which subjects listen to a number of audio-recorded speakers and evaluate them on some measurement instrument. In order to secure the 'subconscious' nature of the evaluations, the experiment is designed and conducted according to a number of strict guidelines: no disclosing information is given until after the experiment's completion; the assessed speech (i.e. the audio-recorded speakers) stays within the normal variation of the speech community under study; the measuring instrument is constructed so as to avoid attracting judges' attention to 'dialect' differences as the object of study. We only accept the obtained data to be subconsciously offered if we, after the fulfilment of the experiment and before debriefing, get nothing but innocuous answers from subjects to our inquiries about 'what it was all about'.

No matter where they live, young Danes speak standard Danish, which historically speaking is 'Copenhagen dialect spread to the whole country' (Brink and Lund 1975 p. 769). Basically, this standard may be spoken in three different ways that may be termed Conservative (C), Modern (M), and Local (L). In Copenhagen, the normal variation may be described as more or less C/M-coloured Standard Danish. These are relative terms of course. As new ways of speaking appear continually, the involved social meanings are likely to change accordingly: what is 'modern and in' today, may be 'outdated and out'

tomorrow. Everywhere outside of Copenhagen, the common variation may be described as the same C/M-colouring, with the addition of a possible L-colouring, which is mainly of prosodic nature. Our comparisons of conscious and subconscious attitudes are based on the assumption that reactions to differently C/M/L-accented speech can be meaningfully correlated with rankings of *rigsdansk/københavnsk/local dialect*.

In the speaker evaluation experiment used in the LANCHART project (<http://dgcss.dk>), representative samples of adolescents from five communities across Denmark from east to west (Copenhagen, Næstved, Vissenbjerg, Odder, and Vinderup) listened to 12 speakers (8 in Copenhagen), 4 for each of the 3 (2 in Copenhagen) locally relevant accents – and evaluated these on 8 seven-point ‘adjective scales’ representing positive vs. negative personality traits (‘intelligent – stupid’, ‘fascinating – boring’, etc.).

The results show the same pattern for all 5 communities, and confirm previous findings from other communities. L-accented speech is assessed very negatively in comparison with C- and M-accented speech on all scales. As to the M/C-variation, M-speech is most strongly upgraded on ‘dynamism’ traits (self-assured, fascinating, cool, nice), whereas C-accented speech does just as well or even better on ‘superiority’ traits (intelligent, conscientious, goal-directed, trustworthy). Overall, the ranking of Danish standard accents by adolescents is  $M > C > L$  when subconsciously offered.

#### 1.4. Language use

In terms of vitality at the level of language use, the ranking is also  $M > C > L$ , as is evident from Danish sociolinguistic research in general (see overviews in Pedersen 2003, Kristensen 2003).

#### 1.5. Summing up internal Danish purism

Table 1 lists the rank orders we have established. Recall that we found the reciprocal ranking of *rigsdansk* and *local dialects* in official discourse to be dependent on whether the evaluative perspective is ‘communicative efficiency’ or ‘social identity’. Now, on the assumption that labels and accents correspond to each other as follows – [*rigsdansk* ↔ C] [*københavnsk* ↔ M] [*local dialect name* ↔ L] – three important points can be made. Firstly, when consciously offering attitudes, Danish adolescents reproduce the ranking order found in the ‘social identity’ version of official discourse. While adolescents thus take the opportunity to flag ‘local patriotism’, it may be mentioned that the general adult performance in the label ranking task is to signal recognition of *rigsdansk* ‘superiority’. In any case, and most importantly, *københavnsk* is the certain loser. Secondly, the consciously offered ranking of *local* and *københavnsk* is turned upside down as M-accented speech clearly beats L-accented speech in the subconsciously offered ranking. Thirdly, the hierarchization in terms of vitality corresponds to the subconscious layer of lay attitudes.

Table 1: Evaluative hierarchizations of the three labels (*rigsdansk*, *københavnsk*, *local dialect name*) and three accents (C, M, L) assumed to be relevant to social identification processes among adolescents in any Danish locality.

	The official hierarchy	Lay attitudes		Use vitality
		conscious	subconscious	
1	<i>rigsdansk</i> / <i>local dialect name</i>	<i>local dialect name</i>	M	M
2	<i>local dialect name</i> / <i>rigsdansk</i>	<i>rigsdansk</i>	C	C
3	<i>københavnsk</i>	<i>københavnsk</i>	L	L

## 2. External purism in the Nordic communities

### 2.1. The official ideology

Linguists who are familiar with the Nordic languages and communities will readily agree on how they rank relatively to each other as far as external purism is concerned. Such rankings, based on general acquaintance with the official language policies of the communities, can actually be found in the literature (Lund 1986 p. 35, Vikør 1995 p. 181): Iceland > The Faroe Islands > Norway > Finnish-speaking Finland > Swedish-speaking Finland > Sweden > Denmark.

### 2.2. Consciously offered attitudes

In order to investigate whether these relationships between the communities or languages also exist in lay attitudes and language use, we shall refer to results from empirical research conducted within the MIN project ([www.moderne-importord.info](http://www.moderne-importord.info)).

Consciously offered attitudes were obtained in telephone interviews, conducted by professional poll institutes, with representative population samples in all of the seven participating communities (total N about 6000). The English influence issue was addressed both ‘abstractly’ (subjects were asked to express degree of agreement with statements like e.g. ‘far too many English words are being used today’) and ‘concretely’ (subjects were presented with a few pairs of presumed synonymous word pairs and asked about their preference for either the English word or national word, e.g. ‘e-mail or e-post’).

The results rank the languages as shown in Table 2. The only difference between the two ranks (abstract and concrete) consists in a change of positions as number (2) and (3) for the Faroese and Finnish communities. The Icelandic, Faroese and Finnish communities are the more purist ones, the Danish and Swedish communities are the more open ones, the Norwegian and Finland-Swedish communities are in-between. Thus we may conclude that our rank ordering based on lay peoples’ consciously offered attitudes comes close to being a perfect copy of the experts’ ranking based on their acquaintance with official policies; this holds true, in particular, of the ‘abstract’ approach. (For further information on the MIN telephone survey, see Kristiansen & Vikør 2006.)

Table 2: Seven Nordic communities rank-ordered according to degrees of consciously expressed external purism by lay people in ‘abstract’ and ‘concrete’ approaches to the English-influence issue.

	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)		(5)
abstract	Ic	>	Fa	>	No/FS/Fi	>	SS	>	Da
concrete	Ic	>	Fi	>	FS/No/Fa	>	SS	>	Da

Ic = Icelandic, Fa = Faeroese, No = Norwegian, FS = Finland-Swedish, Fi = Finnish, SS = Sweden-Swedish, Da = Danish

Significance testing shows that both ranks embody five positions: > = significant, / = non-significant

If we limit ourselves to looking at the Scandinavian-language communities – which we will do in the remainder of the paper – the rank order in both approaches is: No/FS > SS > Da.

### 2.3. Subconsciously offered attitudes

The MIN speaker evaluation experiment was designed in accordance with the previously mentioned guidelines for securing collection of subconsciously offered data (section 1.3). The so-called matched-guise technique (MGT) was used. This means that one voice appeared twice (in two ‘guises’) – in a ‘pure’ guise and an ‘English-coloured’ guise – dispersed among 3 filler-voices. The idea of the MGT is to measure differences in reaction to speech which is varied in form (pure vs. English-coloured) and controlled for impact from extra-linguistic factors (same voice). Furthermore, control for impact from content is obtained by having the voices read or perform the same text, with small variations in form. It goes without saying that the construction of English-coloured guises capable of eliciting comparable data in seven different speech communities is no easy matter; and it takes a good cover story, of course, to make this whole set-up probable as something else than a readily recognizable attitudes-towards-English experiment. We shall not delve into these problems here, but underline that we feel assured that our data from the Scandinavian-language communities represent subconsciously offered attitudes. (The collection of subconsciously offered attitudes proved itself to be more difficult in the non-Scandinavian-language communities.)

The results are based on responses from samples of around 600 informants in each of the communities, broadly recruited in terms of background factors. Even though sample representativity is a more problematic issue here than in the case of the telephone survey, we feel fairly certain that we can allow ourselves to generalize the evaluative pattern found for each community, and hence to trust the ordering of the communities that is based on these patterns. Most purist is the Danish community, followed by the Sweden-Swedish community. In both communities, the English-coloured guise was downgraded in comparison with the pure national guise. In contrast, the Norwegian and Finland-Swedish communities emerge as the less purist ones as they both evaluate the English-coloured guise on a par with, or even a little better than, the pure national guise. In other words, the ranking based on subconsciously offered attitudes turns the ranking based on consciously offered attitudes (see 2.2.) upside down: Da > SS > No/FS. (For further information on the MIN matched-guise study, see Kristiansen 2006.)

## 2.4. Language use

The MIN project has studied the impact of imports at the lexical, morphological and orthographic levels of written language, and at the morphological and phonological levels of spoken language. Newspaper texts (from the same days and years in all communities) made up the main material for the studies of written language, whereas the spoken language material was elicited from informants. Figure 1 gives an overview of the results and relationships with regard to the four Scandinavian-language communities.

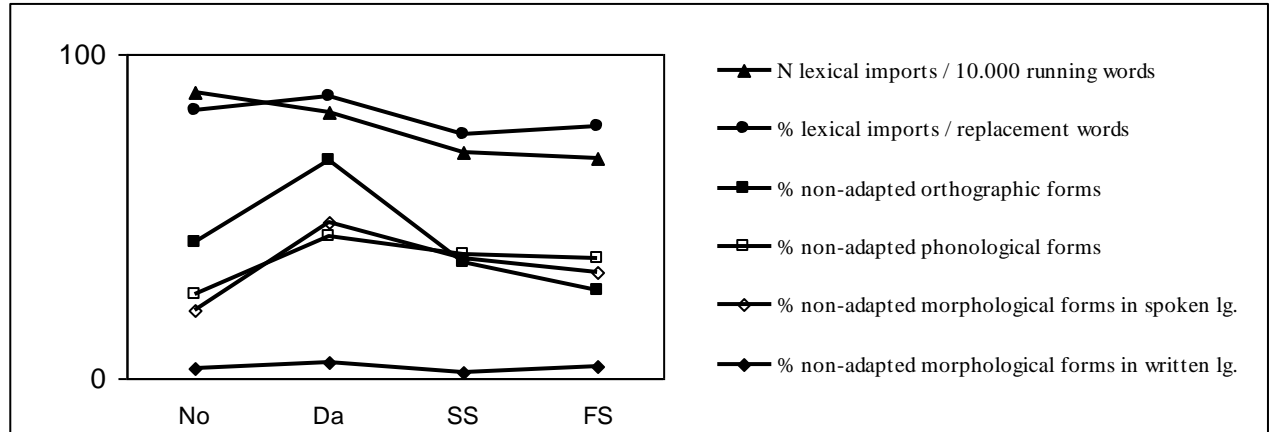


Figure 1: Language use on six parameters in the four Scandinavian-language communities (No = Norwegian, Da = Danish, SS = Sweden-Swedish, FS = Finland-Swedish).

After having noticed that (i) there is no difference between the four languages with regard to morphology in written language (cf. the bottom curve), we move up to the other curves and notice that (ii) the relationship between the two forms of Swedish (SS and FS) is generally a relationship of little or no difference, that (iii) Swedish is generally more purist than Danish, while (iv) Norwegian change rank order position in comparison with the other communities, from the most purist position on the two spoken-language parameters (cf. curves with non-filled symbols), through a less purist position than Swedish on the orthographic parameter, to the position as the most ‘open’ language in the lexical domain. (For further information on the MIN language use studies, see Selback & Sandøy 2007, Kvaran 2007, Jarvad & Sandøy 2007, Omdal forthc.)

## 2.5. Summing up external purism in the Scandinavian-language communities

Table 3 gives an overview of the various ‘differences in purism’ that we have established for the four Scandinavian-language communities. The communities/languages are compared two by two: The first column shows the differences found for Norwegian and Danish, the second column shows the differences found for Norwegian and Sweden-Swedish, etc. These pairwise comparisons per se are not our main concern here, but we may notice en passant that Sweden-Swedes and Finland-Swedes in the last column show no differences at all as far as language use is concerned, in spite of the differences in official ideology and lay attitudes.

Table 3: External purism in the Scandinavian-language communities. Comparisons of communities two by two.

	No Da	No SS	No FS	Da SS	Da FS	SS FS	Condition of data production
<b>Official ideology</b>	<b>No &gt; Da</b>	<b>No &gt; SS</b>	<b>No &gt; FS</b>	<b>SS &gt; Da</b>	<b>FS &gt; Da</b>	<b>FS &gt; SS</b>	
<b>Lay attitudes</b>							
telephone survey	No > Da	No > SS	/	SS > Da	FS > Da	FS > SS	consc.
matched guise	Da > No	SS > No	/	Da > SS	Da > FS	SS > FS	subconsc.
<b>Use – speech</b>							
phonology	No > Da	No > SS	No > FS	SS > Da	FS > Da	/	consc.
morphology	No > Da	No > SS	No > FS	SS > Da	FS > Da	/	consc.
<b>Use – writing</b>							
lex.: imp./repl.	/	SS > No	FS > No	SS > Da	FS > Da	/	subconsc.
lex.: imp./10.000	Da > No	SS > No	FS > No	SS > Da	FS > Da	/	subconsc.
orthography	No > Da	SS > No	FS > No	SS > Da	FS > Da	/	
morphology	/	/	/	/	/	/	

No = Norwegian, Da = Danish, SS = Sweden-Swedish, FS = Finland-Swedish > = more purist than, / = no difference

The first row shows the differences in purism as these are estimated to be by language policy experts, on the basis of general knowledge in these matters, including knowledge of official language policies in particular: The Norwegian community is more purist than the Danish, the Sweden-Swedish, the Finland-Swedish, and so on. Now, our main interest here is to see whether these (estimated) differences in official ideology are also found in lay attitudes and in language use. This is the case in the white cells in the table. Cells are grey if the found difference is the opposite of the official ideology difference, or if there is no difference.

The last column in the table indicates whether the data which are analysed were offered consciously or subconsciously – i.e. whether people who produced the data were aware or unaware of producing data to be analysed in a study of purism towards external influence on their language and speech community. Data were consciously offered in the telephone survey and in the studies of spoken language. Data were subconsciously offered in the matched guise experiment. This can also be said of the written texts, as no one knew at the time of their production that these texts would be made the object of studies of external influence on their authors' language. As for the lexical level, at least, there is no problem in regarding the amount of imports (in terms of frequencies or percentages) as subconsciously offered data.

As for orthography and morphology, however, newspaper texts as a rule follow official guidelines and therefore the distinction between consciously and subconsciously offered data does not really apply. We would simply expect the purism differences on these two levels of written language to reflect the purism differences of official ideology. Thus, we are not surprised to find that Danish orthography is more 'open' to external influence than Norwegian and Swedish (SS and FS) orthographies, but surprised to find that Norwegian orthography is more 'open' to external influence than Swedish (SS and FS) orthography. In fact, the number of grey cells for orthography and written morphology (= non-accordance with the official ideology pattern) is surprisingly high as it amounts to nine, against only three white cells (= accordance with the official ideology pattern). The same can be said



about the lexical level, which presents eight grey cells against four white. Only Danish versus Swedish (SS and FS) reveals a 'purism difference' in accordance with the official ideology pattern.

In contrast, spoken language shows a pattern of purism differences which is a close to perfect reproduction of the official ideology pattern (with the exception of the SS vs. FS comparison). This contrast between spoken and written language may seem surprising, indeed, until we take the condition of data production into account. The spoken data was elicited from subjects who were aware that influence-from-English was the focus of interest. It is quite likely, therefore, that the results say little about real purism differences in spoken language, but say a lot about the impact of official ideology on lay conscious attitudes.

In general, the main point to emerge from Table 3 is the manifest importance of whether the analyzed data were offered either consciously or subconsciously. On the one hand, what we, following expert estimations, have postulated to be a community's official degree of purism, relatively to other communities, is by and large reproduced in consciously offered data (attitudes and use). On the other hand, the predominant fact about subconsciously offered data (attitudes and use) is that they contradict the purism differences of official ideology.

### **3. General conclusion – and possible implications for official language policy**

Based on comprehensive empirical research concerning both internal purism (standard vs. non-standard in Denmark) and external purism (openness vs. purism in Nordic communities) we have been able to establish relationships between official ideology, lay attitudes and language use – patterns of similarity and difference – which invite us to reflect on the conditions and aims of language policy.

The general facts are that lay language attitudes differ greatly depending on whether they are offered consciously or subconsciously, and, furthermore, that language use is not affected by consciously offered attitudes, but is affected by subconsciously offered attitudes. Regarding the role of official language policy, we have demonstrated, somewhat contrary to what is often claimed, that its impact on consciously offered attitudes is very strong. The official discourse in these matters seems to be present in the public sphere in ways that allow community members to draw on it whenever need be. This impact, indeed, is a remarkable achievement, and it raises the question of what the mechanisms behind the general accessibility and acceptance are. However, as it is without any impact whatsoever on the attitudes that seem to govern language use, the more interesting question about the official language policy turns out to be what other social functions can explain the development of its tremendous strength. The question to be raised regarding a possible influence for official language policy on language use seems to be how to go about influencing the ideological layer where the subconsciously offered attitudes are found – if the very idea of searching for such influence on the private layer of language ideology is not in itself is a self-contradiction?

We may suggest that two issues will need to be resolved as the discipline of language policy develops a deeper understanding of its possibilities and priorities – probably by further empirical research more than by ponderings on already available findings. The first issue concerns the nature of language attitudes. As a distinction between two value

systems, or two ideological layers, reappear again and again in sociolinguistic studies – variously glossed as ‘overt vs. covert’, ‘public vs. private’, ‘explicit vs. implicit’, and others – it may well be in the very nature of language attitudes, as an important ingredient of social identification processes, to vary and differ according to evaluative contexts and perspectives. Thus, solid theorizing about the possibilities and priorities of official language policy will have to reflect on whether the discrepancy between consciously and subconsciously offered attitudes is to be treated as a necessity, or a historical contingency.

The second issue concerns the nature of the relationship between language attitudes and language use. If social evaluation is an integrated and, arguably, main force in language variation and change processes, the role of the two ideological layers in these processes will have to be clarified. It is a commonplace in sociolinguistics to point out that the facts about language use often contradicts what people claim about language use. In the same vein, we have presented empirical evidence here to the effect that language use accords with subconsciously, not consciously, offered attitudes. Thus, solid theorizing about the possibilities and priorities of official language policy will have to reflect on whether subconsciously offered attitudes relate to language use in a motivational way that consciously offered attitudes do not.

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